



Note from the roundtable  
convened by HERE-Geneva  
on 13 November 2024

# Taking the

# NEXT STEP

# in reforming humanitarian action

Turning 10 in November 2024, HERE has taken the opportunity to review [overarching findings](#) from the last decade. While the picture is not all bleak, systemic gaps remain. A number of recent system-wide reviews provide evidence that [principled humanitarian action, protection, working collectively, and leadership and accountability](#) remain the Achilles' heel of the system.<sup>1</sup>

Many would say that the expectations that have been placed on the humanitarian system are unfair and unreasonable. The number of people in need of humanitarian aid has reached almost 300 million, but funding levels are declining. The system is faced with situations of armed conflict and violence in which impunity for breaking the laws that are supposed to guarantee a minimum level of humanity has become the rule instead of the exception. All of this is true, but this does not mean that nothing can be done. Global geopolitics do constrain the humanitarian margin of manoeuvre, but there are things that can be done and that are within reach of the sector. There is no lack of policies, guidelines, reporting lines, or lessons learnt. With the appointment of a new UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), there is an opportunity to revisit and reinvigorate the agenda on collective humanitarian priorities.

Marking its anniversary, HERE convened a roundtable to constructively think of what the next step should be. Senior humanitarian practitioners from UN and non-UN agencies, key donor representatives, and senior independent humanitarian thinkers and leaders were present. In May 2023 HERE organised a [similar event, on the topic of “what is left to do” in humanitarian reform](#). One of the main conclusions coming out of that discussion was that moving forward is not so much about further reform, but about making sure that initiatives and commitments that have already been undertaken truly gain traction. HERE also particularly noted the importance of ensuring that such existing initiatives and commitments not be seen as separate policy goals, but that they be approached as part of a bigger integrated effort, that enhances value-based coordination while taking the system's political economy into account. In light of this, the November 2024 discussion around “the next step” was shaped precisely in view of ensuring that key priority areas are approached in conjunction with each other. Three priority areas were put on the agenda: the centrality of protection, leadership and accountability, and working collectively. Each important priorities in their own right, they are deeply interconnected and highly foundational to humanitarian response. With everyone participating in an individual capacity and along the Chatham House Rule, the open and frank conversation allowed for the formulation of a number of key take-aways.

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<sup>1</sup> Among them are: Schenkenberg et al., [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Northern Ethiopia](#), May 2024; Darcy et al., [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan](#), April 2024; Sida et al., [Independent review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement](#), Humanitarian Policy Group, March 2024; Sida et al., [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis](#), July 2022; Cocking et al., [Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy](#), Humanitarian Policy Group, May 2022; and also the 2023 ERC flagship initiative <https://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative>



## KEY MESSAGES FROM THE ROUNDTABLE

- **Humanitarians: act on protection concerns.**

Common agreement that all humanitarian programming needs to be looked at through a protection lens is one thing; coming together to act on commonly agreed protection issues is another. Since the conceptualisation of protection in humanitarian response in the late 1990s, two dedicated reviews undertaken in the last ten years have shown frequent absence of robust collective protection strategies and advocacy.

Achieving protection outcomes for crisis-affected people is first and foremost the responsibility of states and other duty bearers, and is therefore not always within the power of humanitarians to deliver. However, it is the role and responsibility of humanitarians to provide evidence and maintain a clear narrative in the face of massive violations of rights and impunity. They should be held accountable for not implementing this commitment. Evaluations have shown major shortcomings in such accountability.

A collective humanitarian strategy should not only cover influencing action to stop violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, but it should also ensure that protection concerns are systematically identified and labelled as such. Protection crises should not be described as food crises – as in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen – and it should be recalled that a core protection concern is often people's lack of access to services. It is important not to overpromise or seek political attention on too wide a variety of issues, but to collectively agree as a sector what is to be prioritised as non-negotiable.

- **Protection is a political/leadership issue, not a technical one.**

Because protection concerns must underpin humanitarian strategies, protection is essentially a leadership issue. Yet, protection issues are more often than not delegated to a technical level, to be dealt with by clusters, subclusters, and task forces. Although the cluster system allows for the sharing of expertise and guidance on specific issues, e.g. on land rights or mine-clearance, this architecture has made protection a technocratic matter, instead of one that galvanises political action. In non-international armed conflicts especially, to prevent protection concerns from being sacrificed for access or good relations with governments, protection must be prioritised at the highest levels, including the IASC at the global level and the Humanitarian Coordination Team (HCT) at the country level. The role and the composition of the HCT needs to reflect the significance of protection as a leadership issue. Donors' pressure is important in moving protection forward. Their humanitarian diplomacy as state actors may be helpful too in supporting a protection agenda.

- **There is a need for protection policy coherence beyond the humanitarian sector.**

The political economy of the system means that the humanitarian sector cannot discuss its approach to protection in isolation. The Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator needs to bring their wider concerns into the Humanitarian Country Team meetings, and donors need to exchange with their colleagues in other departments to ensure policy coherence. The political significance of protection cannot be harnessed if one arm of the international system is working on ending impunity, while the other is handing out unconditional investment loans to authorities who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

- **Bring clarity to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and accountability for commitments.**

The newly appointed Emergency Relief Coordinator needs to clarify the role of the IASC. This opportunity should be seized to ensure that the IASC has a clear mandate – one that includes holding agencies to

account for their commitments. The gaps shown by Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs) and other system-wide reviews need to be addressed. Rarely do their findings result in measures that have implications for those humanitarian leaders who are found to perform sub-optimally. Recognising that IAHEs are carried out after the fact, more investment should also be made in Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs), which carry the potential for reacting and learning in real-time.

- **Humanitarian Coordinators need to be enabled and protected by the system.**

In many protection crises, HCs are put in an impossible position of having to choose between dangerous silence or hiding or distributing blame so as to not confront the power of the system. While the HC is ultimately accountable to all in need, the guidance they receive is weak to the level of inefficiency.<sup>2</sup> HCs have to be empowered by agencies to carry out their leadership role. This includes ensuring they are truly protected within and by the system. It also includes making sure that the coordination efforts are well staffed, and not subsumed in the RC role. A lack of technical capacity for humanitarian coordination also impacts leadership credibility.

- **Non-bureaucratic, bottom-up reform needs to be enabled from within.**

Cash assistance has been at the origin of one of the biggest changes in humanitarian work in the last 10-15 years. It has challenged the current system. If properly done, it arguably negates the need for the clusters and many humanitarian organisations. Aside from this successful example, most attempts to change the system have come from within, and have been bureaucratic, tick-box exercises. Some, such as the creation of hotlines as a form of complaints-mechanisms for crisis-affected people, have completely gone out of control. Bottom-up reform efforts such as the flagship initiative have potential, but given the power distribution in the system, there is also a need for a push from within to change. It is disheartening that HCs are not held accountable to affected populations who are only rarely let into the room. There is a need to rethink the humanitarian endeavour, and what 'humanitarian' means, in a way that better includes local voices.

- **Collective action requires incentives...**

Working together is key to ensuring policy coherence and clarity around the humanitarian narrative, and coordination platforms carry an important accountability function. Working collectively takes time and effort however and it is currently not sufficiently incentivised. Funding allocations remain largely geared towards agencies working individually, instead of working collectively. This needs to change, and donors have an important role to play in funding coordination efforts and looking for collective action in funding proposals. Disincentives – like risks of being silenced if speaking out on challenges in the system – need to be removed. One way of incentivising working collectively could be appealing to the principle of humanity, and focusing more on the massive impact concerted humanitarian action at scale is likely to have for affected people. Working together should be built into each agency's organisational strategy, simply because it is the best way to achieve humanitarian outcomes.

- **...but also system-level listening, trust, and transparency.**

While incentivising collective action is certainly important, it is not enough in a complex system, which sees many externalities that humanitarians themselves cannot control or influence. This means that one kind of change – like introducing an incentive structure – will not change everything. Rather, in a complex system, two types of activities are required. First, on a systemic level, all different voices have to be listened to and connected. It is important to bear in mind that civil society exists separately to

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, 20 out of 28 HCs are first time HCs currently.

humanitarian action, which means that the humanitarian system should not be a conduit for civil society, but it should value the existence of civil society and create visibility for it without overwhelming it. Second, there is a need to ensure trust, and transparency. For coordination, stakeholders have to trust each other to do what they say they will do ('headtrust'). And for true collaboration, they all have to trust that they have each others' back ('hearttrust'). As seen in the Flagship project – coordination works better at the very local level, where there are fewer people who are more likely to know each other better, and to have a well-established trust.

- **The focus needs to be on results, not delivery.**

Building trust starts with being trust-worthy, and being clear on one's identity is a basic requirement. However, in speaking of the humanitarian system as life-saving and short-term, humanitarian actors arguably pretend to be what they are not. The focus is very much on quantitative indicators on delivery, while delivery as such does not save lives, especially as most responses are carried out in long-term protracted settings. Until there is honesty around what the system is trying to achieve, it will be very difficult to reform it. The system can better incentivise collective action by focusing on measuring outcomes achieved rather than merely tracking delivery. Much of the onus of changing the focus away from delivery is on donors, who should ask for results.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The ambition for this round table discussion was to move away from analysing the problem, and towards suggesting concrete and practical solutions. The hope is that the key messages above be taken further by the newly appointed Emergency Relief Coordinator in view of a reinvigorated collective humanitarian agenda.

In view of its own mission, HERE notes the following in particular:

- As researchers, reviewers, and evaluators we need to stay away from offering technocratic solutions. If reviews and evaluations are to function as true instruments for accountability, they cannot hide the perennial and systemic issues behind technical findings that are perhaps easier to address but that do not provide for more than cosmetic changes. It is also important to advocate for and examine the follow-up of recommendations. We will resist going down the laundry list of policy issues in our reviews, but place protection, leadership and accountability, working collectively, above other so-called priorities.
- Real-time evaluations are important additions in the toolbox of accountability. They complement the post facto findings of traditional evaluations, and allow for course-correction and learning. As first outlined by HERE following a [2018 expert consultation](#), HERE will continue to promote RTEs as a cost-effective, complementary measure for humanitarian quality assurance and look at policy bodies, donor forums, and NGO appeal bodies for commissioning RTEs.
- There is a need for more trust in the humanitarian sector, and for all actors to be honest about who they are, what they are aiming to achieve, and how. As part of its exchange function, HERE will continue to provide a space for open and honest conversations among key stakeholders. All in the room must be prepared to share their uncertainties and questions and be open to learning. It is not about what we have achieved, but what we still need to achieve.
- The measuring of results or outcomes, instead of reporting on delivery, is an approach that will have to be translated in new research methods and deeper analysis of what crisis-affected people really want.